

BILLY FERGUSON MET TRAGIC DEATH

Remember Provo Canyon Snowslide Of 1896-- It Was 'Daddy of Them All'

By Ruth Louise Partridge

On a bitter, cold morning in February, 1896, Will Slick, a student at the Telluride School of Electrical Engineering, arose from his bed, went to the window as people will on getting up, and what he saw startled him. Dressing hastily he went out to investigate.

The school was located in buildings still standing at the mouth of Provo Canyon, and what had startled young Slick was the dirth of water in Provo River, for in those days before dams and ditches and diversion canals took their toll, Provo River was considerable of a stream—or was until this morning.

At breakfast he mentioned to the housekeeper who cooked for the resident boys, that there must have been a very big snow slide up the canyon in the night.

After breakfast, Will Slick saddled a big black horse, and started up the canyon to see what was damming off the river flow. He found it at Ferguson's Flat, named for Billy Ferguson who had a house, barn, granary, and the usual buildings of a home he was proving up on government land. What Will Slick saw was nothing familiar, but an unbroken expanse of snow, from mountain to mountain. Horrified, he rode down the canyon as fast as his mount would carry him.

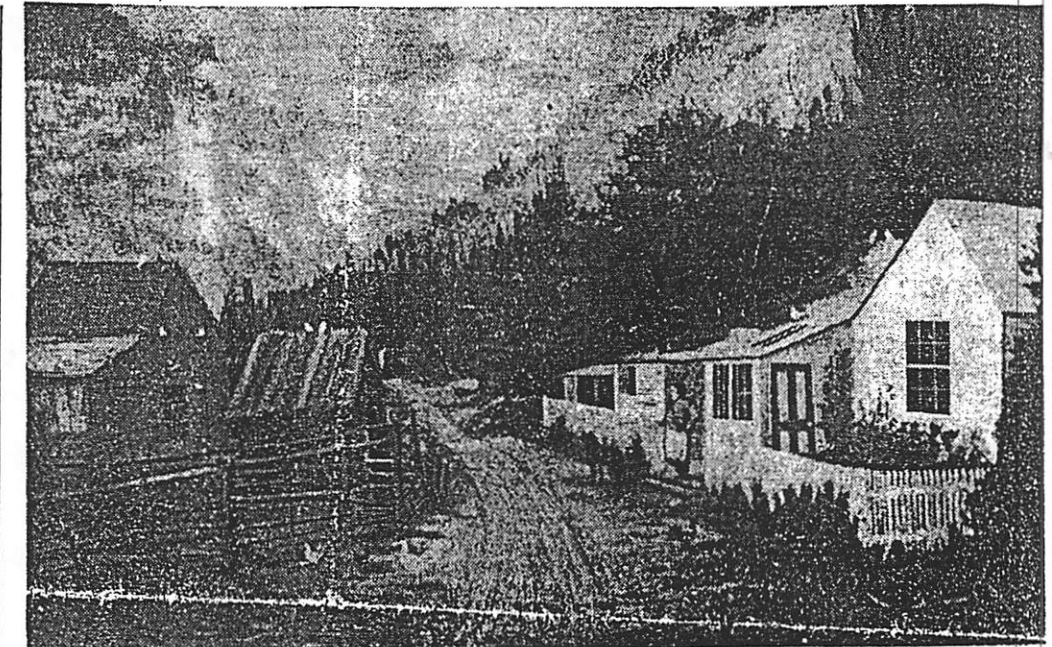
Passing the school, Slick took the river bottom (Carterville) road and at sight of farmers he yelled at them, "There's been a slide in Provo Canyon and Billy Ferguson is buried up!" Then he rode on toward Provo. He must have passed the farm of Ferguson's two sons, and given the word, but he galloped on into Provo, right down to "the bank corner," the site these days of the City Drug. Here he frantically passed the word to all and sundry.

At once horses were saddled or harnessed to buggies and wagons, and the cavalcade set out for the scene of disaster as fast as they could go. This was not very fast. The ice and bitter cold did not help the condition of the canyon road, something that we can hardly imagine in this day of paved highways. The road was narrow, twisted, full of stumps, rocks, ruts, chuck-holes, going straight up one side of a hill and straight down the other on dugways that dropped away from the wheels.

Strenuous Riding

It is remembered that the first of the party reached the flat about noon, which would call for some strenuous riding, both by Will Slick and the men who followed him back. The group began to dig for Billy Ferguson, after looking over the monstrous slide of snow, which had come crashing down the south side of the canyon, across river and road and with such force that it pushed up the mountain on the other side, and fell back, with double fury onto the home of Billy Ferguson.

Billy Ferguson was an interesting man in his own right. He had operated a toll gate where Springdell now is. The road and a bridge there were maintained some say by the county some say by a private company, probably both. Mr. William (Old Man) Burbick was interested, and so was Oscar Sperry, and of course there were others, probably David Thomas. Even then there was a



ARTIST'S DRAWING OF FERGUSON'S FLAT—Here is a photograph of a painting by Joseph Kerby of the home and barnyard of Billy Ferguson, historic figure of Provo Canyon who was killed when his home was dashed to pieces by a tremendous snowslide in 1896. The picture portrays Ferguson on the front porch, with his beloved dog, Belle, close by. Feb 1897

Provo Canyon, and Provo wanted it for her own. They would try to outwit the toll by coming into the canyon above it.

Toll charges, according to Walter Taylor, were 50 cents for a wagon and horses, loaded or not, each way—that is, up and down the canyon. Critters were 10 cents (that is, horse and cows) but sheep

were only three or four cents a head, and could be so much a bunch. A buggy paid 25 cents as did a horse being ridden.

When finally the road was thrown open as "free," Billy Ferguson took up a homestead at Ferguson's Flat, one mile this side of Vivian Park of these days. Having tasted life in the wild—and make no mistake about it, it was wild—Ferguson lost interest in city ways, and as a matter of fact, he had a very nice thing in his canyon home. There was a spring there, with a watering trough for animals. Travelers over the hard canyon road could stop at Ferguson's and order a meal which Billy cooked himself. He had a small store there with crackers and candy, cookies, gingersnaps and so on in small wooden barrels. A man could have simple repairs made on wagons and harness, and there was a bed for the weary traveler who wanted to stay the night, and he was welcome, for Billy Ferguson loved people, and he loved to fix for them, and pass the time of day.

Way With Wildlife

Billy Ferguson had a way with birds and animals. It was known that when he went outside and whistled in a certain way, all the birds within hearing, tame and wild, came and lit on his shoulders, his head, anywhere they could. It must have been a sight.

And there was the little dog, Belle. Belle was full of tricks. Billy would put her on display. He played the guitar, and he would say, "Come on now, Belle—let's see what you can do," then he'd play a lively tune and little Belle would dance on her hind feet, around and around and be as proud as Billy Ferguson. It was just a way he had.

Ferguson loved flowers too. He had something of a greenhouse in his little canyon home, with glass panels in the roof as the illustration shows. His house plants were a marvel and a wonder to all who passed by. Oh yes, Billy Ferguson

that had joined the party began to uncover things, working with pick and shovel in the bitter cold. As the barrels from the store were uncovered and passed up through the hole dug in the snow, the men, half starved and half frozen, wolfed them down, the crackers, the gingersnaps, the candy, and then went grimly on with their work. knowing by now that there was no hope of finding Billy Ferguson alive.

There wasn't a chair or stick of furniture left whole. Of a cupboard of dishes, one was unbroken.

Found In Bed

About three in the afternoon they found Billy Ferguson, asleep in his bed, with his faithful little dog Belle asleep beside him on the floor, her head between her paws. It could just be that the awful vacuum made by the rushing avalanche took the breath of those living, as a draft does a candle, for there was no sign of struggle, or terror. A good way to go, before the weight of the crushing snow was even felt, or known.

One unbroken dish. And something else. One wall was left standing, and on that wall was the oil painting from which the illustration was made. It was painted on a lovely summer day by a local artist, one Joseph Kerby who lived on "the bench." It is called Orem, these days. While he was painting the house, with Billy standing in front, a covered wagon drove up. It was the Mariot brothers, returning from a fruit peddling trip to Park City. "I'll put you in the picture," Kerby promised, and he did. You can just see the wagon disappearing down the narrow road.

Years later, Mrs. May Clayton (who was Billy Ferguson's daughter) bought fruit from a peddler. He brought her purchase in the house and as he turned to leave, he caught sight of the picture of Billy Ferguson's house hanging on the wall. "You see that covered wagon way down that road?" he asked excitedly. "That was my brother and I. We drove past just as Kerby was painting that picture!" What a strange come to pass, that Mariot, without knowing who Mrs. Clayton was, should chance to enter the house and see that picture!

As always in tales of sudden death, the more after thoughts

yon that night of the snowslide.

He stopped at Billy Ferguson's as everyone did, had supper, and was persuaded to stay the night. and yet, for some reason, he just could not, and finally, not knowing why, he told his host he had decided to go on after all, and

he braved the bitter cold of that February night, and left the snug harbor of the Ferguson house to travel on. Otherwise, he would have been killed too. One wonders if he died an easier death, or a happier one? Did he gain by leaving? Who knows? Who can understand these things? There was no reason to on that night, yet he went on, at some mysterious urging.

Thomas John and Fred Ferguson, a son, brought the body to town in a wagon, and took it to the Graham and Jones undertaking establishment. This was February 19. Billy Ferguson was buried February 21, the birthday of his second son.

For many years there was a trace of field stone foundation and a watering trough to mark the spot where the snow slide came down and took everything with it. I can remember it well. We would stop there, water the horse, father and I, and he would stop playing his mandolin and say in a hushed voice, "A man named Ferguson was killed

here in a snow slide," and it made me shiver.

The trough is gone. The road doesn't pass there anymore. The canyon Billy Ferguson knew is gone, too, the trees, the water, everything. I wonder whatever became of that clear cold spring that comforted so many?

The End.

